Corsairs & Captives

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CALAFAT HASSAN – THE TALE OF A CORSAIR REIS: PART 1

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DECEMBER 2, 2018 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

During the age of the Barbary corsairs, successful corsair captains were not only wealthy and important men; they were folk heroes. In ports like Algiers, they walked—swaggered, rather—though the streets as lords of all they surveyed. People would point at them and whisper. Tales were told of their daring exploits, and of how they bravely met their end: one captain's legs were blown away by a chance cannon ball during an attack; another suffered fatal musket wounds but insisted on having a chair brought to him and sat in it shouting clear orders to his men to the last; a third escaped capture by beaching his ship and marching away inland with his crew, only to succumb to wounds received while battling a local militia.

Corsairing was a violent, dangerous business, and few captains died peacefully in their beds.

But the stories kept being told—and kept their names alive.

One of the names that have come down to us is that of Calafat Hassan.

In his heyday (the 1620s), Calafat Hassan Reis ("reis" being Turkish/Arabic for "Captain") was one of the most famous corsair captains of Algiers. Like so many others of his generation, he was a renegade—a European Christian who forsook his own religion, converted to Islam, and took up a new life. Calafat Hassan Reis was originally Greek, from a poor family. Before he began his career as a corsair, he worked as a calker, somebody who filled in the gaps between the planks of a ship's hull to make them watertight. One of the words for a calker is "calfateur," and the story is that he kept this name as a sort of ironic homage to his past.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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He was a wildly brave and wildly successful Reis. Like so many other corsair captains, though, he did not end up retiring peacefully. In fact, his end was quite… Shakespearean.

This series of posts recounts the tale.

In the summer of 1626, Calafat Hassan Reis was hunting in the waters along the southern coast of Italy and on into the eastern Mediterranean, leading a fleet of seven heavily armed, square-rigged sailing ships and several oared galleys (Algerian corsairs, like corsairs in general, often hunted in packs during this period).

Things began well in a modest way, and they took several small prizes. Then, one morning, they spotted a large Venetian merchant ship. Calafat Hassan Reis sent four of his galleys and his lightest, fasted sailing ship to chase after the Venetian. The wind was light, and the galleys—which relied in manpower at the oars rather than the wind—quickly overhauled their prey.

The plan of attack in a situation like this was a standard one: the galleys would fire a few shots from their bow cannons as they drew near, to make sure the men aboard the ship they were after kept their heads down. Then the galleys would crash up against the ship's hull and the soldiers crowded onto the galleys' decks would swarm the ship, shrieking and shouting, brandishing cutlasses and pikes and pistols.

This time, it didn't work out that way.

In a situation like this, many European vessels would have simply surrendered. The Venetian ship did not.

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Instead, it loosed off volley after volley of witheringly effective cannon fire and drove the galleys back. Eventually, it took Calafat Hassan Reis's entire fleet to overcome the Venetian. It was not until they had reduced the merchant ship to a wreck—the masts shattered, the sails ripped to shreds by cannon balls, dead men littering the deck—that the corsairs were finally able to board it. The corsairs lost a lot of men. No more than a couple of dozen remained alive aboard the Venetian vessel.

At first, Calafat Hassan Reis was furious. This paltry return was not worth the men he had lost of the damage his feet had sustained. But then he discovered that there were three Capuchin friars aboard the Venetian vessels, passengers on their way to the Holy Land. This was good news, for Catholic priests could often be ransomed for very high prices. They alone made this capture worth the effort.

The friars were transferred to Calafat Hassan Reis's ship and chained up in the hold, and the fleet moved on in search of new prey.

After taking a further couple of small prizes, the fleet stopped at the port of Modon (modern Methoni, located on the southwest corner of the Peloponnese Peninsula; Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire at this time) to refit and revictual. Calafat Hassan Reis was in the process of selling the three Capuchin friars locally—selling them to a local dealer who could then negotiate the ransoms for them was faster and easier for Calafat Hassan Reis than hauling them all the way back to Algiers. As he was in the midst of negotiations, though, word came of a large merchant ship out at sea passing nearby. He grabbed up the friars, had them flung back into

the hold of his ship, and launched his entire fleet as quickly as possible.

The large merchant ship turned out to be French, large indeed, and loaded down with valuable cargo. Like the Venetians, the French fought, but there was little they could do to prevent the inevitable. Calafat Hassan Reis's ships overwhelmed them, taking the ship, all the men aboard, and all the cargo.

This was the beginning of six weeks of continued and astonishing successes. The fleet raided along the coast of Sicily, making incursions inland to abduct people—men, women, and children—from towns and villages near the coast. They took several more merchant ships at sea, including a Dutch ship. The Republic of the Netherlands had a treaty with Algiers at this time, so Algerian corsairs were supposed to leave Dutch shipping alone. Calafat Hassan Reis, however, claimed that the cargo the ship carried was from Naples, and since Naples hadn't signed any treaty with Algiers, the cargo was his to take—which he did.

By the time the summer season began to turn, Calafat Hassan Reis's ships were stuffed with captives and booty—including the three Capuchin friars still chained up in the hold of Calafat Hassan Reis's ship.

It was time to consider returning to Algiers.

Calafat Hassan Reis did not make such decisions lightly. In fact, he didn't really make them at all. Rather, he let them be made for him through the divinatory properties of the Koran. This practice of divination had given him a reputation as a sorcerer among Europeans.

Calling upon the Koran, Calafat Hassan Reis went through the divinatory process—which involved, among other things, the juggling and shifting about of arrows as well as the use of the holy book. The end result was clear: it was not yet time to return to Algiers.

So Calafat Hassan Reis ordered his fleet northwestwards, towards the southern coast of Sardinia, to do a last series of raids there before returning in triumph to Algiers.

What he didn't know, however, was that word of his depredations had traveled, and a coalition of European forces was, at that very moment, preparing an expeditionary force in hopes of hunting him down and destroying his fleet.

For more about this European force and about the confrontation between them and Calafat Hassan Reis's fleet, see *Calafat Hassan – the Tale of a Corsair Reis: Part 2* here in this blog.

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SLAVERY IN NORTH AFRICA »

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CALAFAT HASSAN – THE TALE OF A CORSAIR REIS: PART 2

NOVEMBER 23, 2018 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *Calafat Hassan – the Tale of a Corsair Reis: Part 1*. If you haven't done so

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already, it's best to read that post before continuing on here.)

The summer of 1626 was a spectacularly successful one for Calafat Hassan Reis and his fleet of corsair ships. Everything seemed to be going their way; they took ship after ship, captive after captive, until their vessels were stuffed with booty and human cargo.

Calafat Hassan Reis guided the fleet using the Koran as a divinatory tool, performing careful rituals, using the prophetic results to make his decisions. It all worked extremely well, so well that it seemed nothing could possibly interfere with their success.

Except…

Calafat Hassan Reis's summer of spectacularly effective raiding provoked several European powers into doing something they rarely did: cooperate.

Pope Urban VIII, King Philip IV of Spain, and Ferdinando II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, organized a joint expedition to hunt down and destroy Calafat Hassan Reis and his fleet and to liberate the captives and booty he had taken. The Pope contributed three galleys, the Spanish King eight, the Tuscan Duke three.

After casting about for some time and following rumors, they eventually heard a report that Calafat Hassan Reis and his fleet were anchored near the island of San Pietro, off the southwest tip of Sardinia. They headed there with all the speed they could muster.

Calafat Hassan Reis was caught by surprise by the unexpected arrival of this formidable galley fleet.

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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His response was to consult the divinatory advice of the Koran. He did this by putting an arrow into the hand of one of his crew who represented the Europeans and another into the hand of a crewmember who represented the corsairs. Then he performed the divinatory ritual and observed how the arrows behaved in the hands of the two men holding them.

The results of this augury were positive: he would not be killed, and his ship would not be taken. Reassured, Calafat Hassan Reis prepared his fleet to resist the attacking galleys.

Calafat Hassan Reis's ship was the largest square-rigged vessel in his fleet, 150 feet long, armed with no less than 46 large and 6 medium-sized cannons, with a crew of 300. One of the Tuscan galleys headed straight for this ship, followed by eight others. The rest of the galleys spread out to attack other ships in the fleet, firing their bow canons, loaded with grapeshot and chain-shot, to clear their adversaries' decks and rip through the rigging, and then jointly assailing individual corsair ships.

At first, the corsairs more than held their own, but then the wind dropped, leaving their square-rigged ships unable to maneuver. The attacking galleys had no such problem and used their advantage to the fullest, nimbly avoiding the corsair ships' broadsides, and then swarming the ships. There were not nearly enough corsair galleys to beat them back, and after two hours of vicious battle, the European galleys had taken two of the square-rigged corsair ships and were closing in on the others. Several of the corsair galleys fled, abandoning their companions.

Seeing all this, Calafat Hassan Reis, whose ship still held out, decided it was time to stage a strategic

retreat.

There remained the matter of the wind, though.

He resorted to ritual sacrifice for salvation.

A ram was brought out—all corsair ships had aboard them a group of rams for this very purpose—and the animal was cut into four quarters. Crying out the ritual words, Calafat Hassan Reis then threw each of these quarters into the sea, in the four directions, in hopes of calling up a favorable wind. This sort of ceremonial sacrifice was standard Barbary corsair practice. They employed it whenever they needed a wind (like when they were passing through the Strait of Gibraltar, where a good following wind meant they could escape pursuit by the Spanish warships that patrolled there), or when they needed to calm the wind (if they were caught in a sudden storm).

The sacrifice didn't work. No wind came.

The attacking galleys closed in for the kill.

Calafat Hassan Reis was a resourceful man, though. He still saw a way he could make the prophecy—that he would not be killed and that his ship would not be taken—come true. He took the treasure he had so far acquired and cast it into the sea so that his attackers could not take it, hastily dumping the mass of flashing silver and gold coins into the waves. Then he set fire to his ship, so they could not take it either. Blinded by rage at this unlooked-for and ignominious end to a summer that had otherwise been so successful, he threw into the flames a young European girl—a girl of rare beauty whom he had previously taken captive and forced to be his paramour—and dove over the ship's gunwale into the sea.

Men from the galleys scrambled aboard Calafat Hassan Reis's burning ship, killing the last of the corsairs they found aboard, hoping to douse the flames and save the ship. The fire had advanced too far, though. The ship was doomed. The men who had come aboard began to abandon the vessel. But then, from belowdecks, they heard the cries of the European captives still chained up in the hold.

A few sprinted down into the burning, smoke-filled hold and freed as many as they could, hacking through their chains and hauling them up the gangways. They couldn't save them all, though. Many died screaming and choking as the flames engulfed the ship. All who could—men from the galleys and newly freed captives alike—leaped overboard into the sea.

Among the captives saved were the three Capuchin friars whom Calafat Hassan Reis had captured at the beginning of the summer.

Calafat Hassan Reis himself was fished out of the sea, singed by the flames, half drowned, but very much alive.

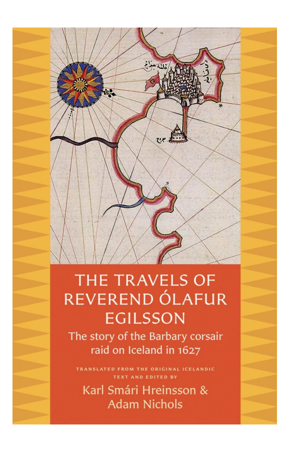
The prophecy had, in a way, been fulfilled: he had not been killed, and his ship had not been taken.

The three Capuchin friars were given passage to Rome, where they had an audience with the Pope. After that, they continued their voyage to the Holy land and back—without incident.

Calafat Hassan Reis was taken to Naples and thrown into a dungeon.

The story does not end there, though.

For the conclusion, see *Calafat Hassan – the Tale of a Corsair Reis: Part 3* here in this blog.



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

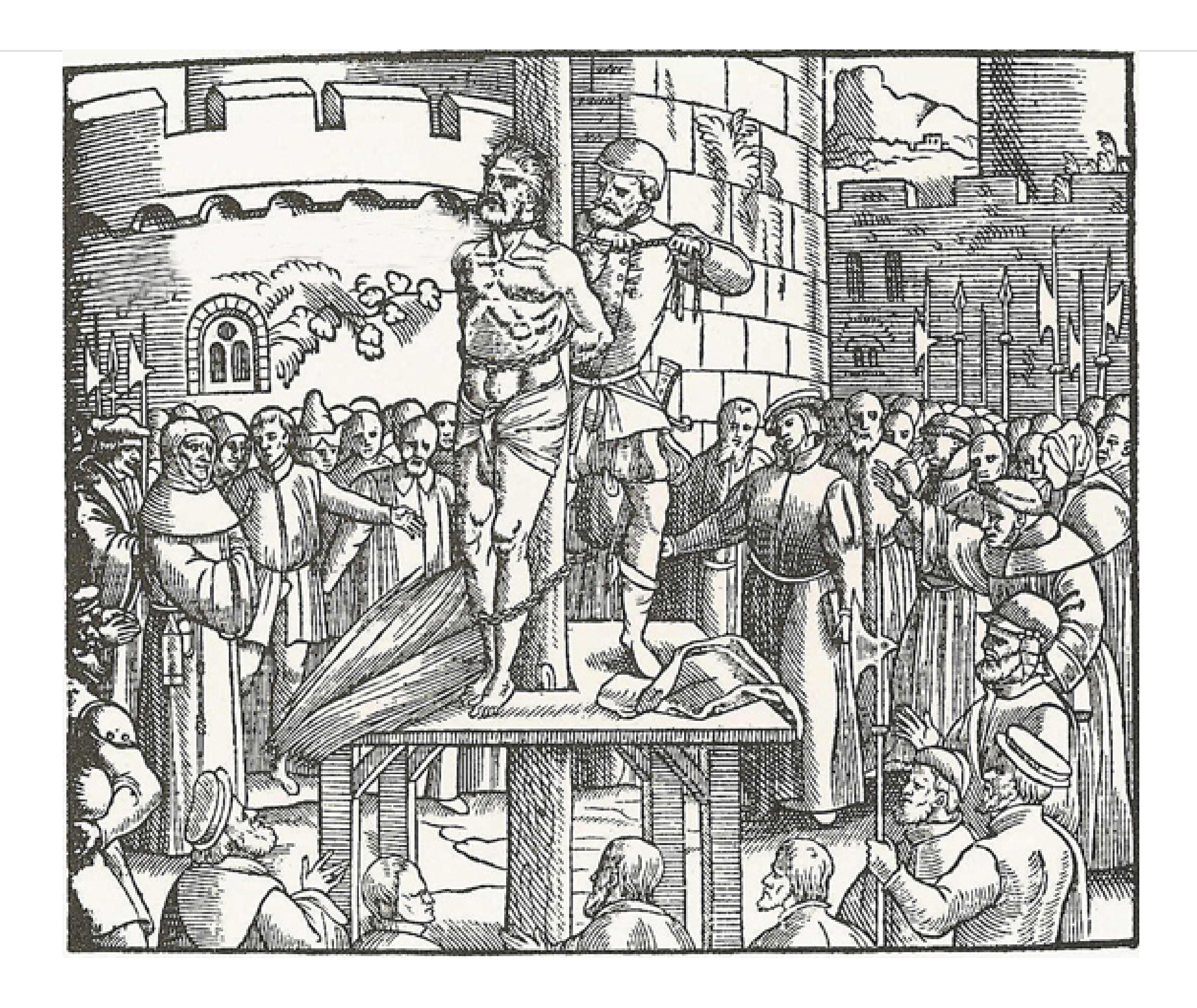
The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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CORSAIR REIS: PART 3

NOVEMBER 16, 2018 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *Calafat Hassan – the Tale of a Corsair Reis: Part 2*. If you haven't done so already, it's best to read Parts 1 and 2 before continuing on here.)

News of Calafat Hassan Reis's capture and subsequent imprisonment in Naples soon reached Algiers.

When Calafat Hassan Reis's wife heard what had happened to her husband, she went straight to the Divan—the ruling council of Algiers—and demanded that they find a captive in Algiers of sufficient rank and importance so that he could be exchanged for her husband. Calafat Hassan Reis was one of the foremost corsair captains in Algiers at this time, and the Divan readily agreed.

The captive they settled on was Don Pedro de Carvajal, a Spanish gentleman of high rank who had been taken by Algiers corsairs while sailing from Spain to Oran. Naples was a Spanish possession at this time, so choosing a high ranking Spanish captive made perfect sense.

Negotiations were begun to swap Don Pedro for Calafat Hassan Reis.

Things progressed slowly, though—very slowly—and after four years there was still no resolution. Calafat Hassan Reis remained chained up in a Naples dungeon; Don Pedro remained a slave in Algiers.



Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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And then a report arrived in Algiers that Calafat Hassan Reis had been executed in Naples by being burned alive at the stake. The news spread quickly throughout Algiers, causing widespread fury. Calafat Hassan Reis's wife, along with her parents, marched to the Divan at the head of an angry mob to demand justice. Since Calafat Hassan Reis had been burned at the stake, they said, Don Pedro must also suffer the same fate.

The members of the Divan agreed to their demand. Moreover, they offered up a second Spanish Gentleman—a man named Don Juan—as well. It was a way to send a message to their Spanish enemy: if the Spanish dared to roast an Algiers corsair alive, the Algiers authorities would roast two Spanish gentlemen in return. Don Pedro and Don Juan were immediately seized and imprisoned in preparation for their execution.

As all this was playing out, however, the parents of Calafat Hassan Reis's wife—now widow—began hatching a scheme of their own.

Don Pedro was a wealthy, educated man from a powerful family. The widow's parents persuaded themselves that if they could convince him to convert and become a *renegado* (the name used to designate European converts, from the Spanish word for "renegade"), he would naturally be an important man in Algiers and so make a suitable husband for their daughter. They visited Don Pedro in prison and made the offer to him: die a painful death, or convert, marry our daughter, and begin a new life in Algiers. This is not as odd an offer as it might seem. Algerian society at this time was remarkably fluid, and there were many European *renegados* in positions of importance. Becoming Muslim wiped the slate clean, and a man could begin a new life.

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Not only did Don Pedro decline their offer, he ridiculed it and said that he would rather stay true to the faith of his fathers and die than live as an apostate.

Don Pedro and Don Juan were taken from their prison and hauled through the streets in chains to the place of their execution. A great crowd followed, shouting angrily.

Don Pedro was to be burned first. He was shackled to an upright stake and a pyre of deadwood built up around him. As the wood was set ablaze, the crowd pressed forward, taunting him. Don Pedro held his head high and recited his prayers—until the flames and the smoke stifled his words.

Then it was Don Juan's turn.

Don Juan, however, had seen enough. He cried out and raised his finger theatrically towards heaven—the recognized symbol that a person wished to become a Muslim. He was immediately freed of his chains and paraded back through the city streets to the Palace of the Pasha (the Ottoman Governor of Algiers). To general applause, the Pasha issued Don Juan new clothing and enrolled him among the janissaries (the Ottoman troops stationed in Algiers), so that he would draw pay as they did.

And so Don Juan became a *renegado* and took up a new life in Algiers.

A report of the burning of Don Pedro soon reached Naples. The news spread quickly throughout the city, causing widespread fury, and an angry mob filled the streets, demanding justice. The city authorities needed little encouragement for they were as outraged as the ordinary citizens.

For Calafat Hassan Reis had *not* been burned at the stake. He had remained in the Naples dungeon all this time.

The false report of his execution had been spread about in Algiers by a corsair captain who loved Calafat Hassan Reis's wife. He had hoped that news of her husband's death would make her more inclined to accept him. Perhaps it did; perhaps it didn't. There is no way for us to know.

It did have one clear effect, though.

Calafat Hassan Reis was taken from his dungeon and hauled through the streets in chains. A great crowd followed, shouting angrily. He was shackled to an upright stake and a pyre of deadwood built up around him. As the wood was set ablaze, the crowd pressed forward, taunting him. He died with his jaw clamped, staring straight ahead, as if indifferent to them all.



The tale of Calafat Hassan Reis comes from two works written by Pierre Dan, a Trinitarian friar who was in Algiers in the summer of 1634 as part of an unsuccessful ransoming expedition (see the two-part *Father Pierre Dan and the 1634 Ransoming Expedition to Algiers* post here in the *Captives* section of this blog for the story of that ransoming expedition).

The details of Calafat Hassan Reis's summer of plunder and eventual capture come from *Les plus illustres captifs: recueil des actions héroïques d'un grand nombre de guerriers et autres chrétiens réduits en esclavage par les mahométans* (*The Most Illustrious Captives: a Collection of the Heroic Actions of a Large Number of Warriors and other Christians Enslaved by*

Muslims), Volume 2, (published 1892), edited by Le R. P. Calixte, pp. 323 -330.

The details of Don Pedro's execution, Don Juan's conversion, and Calafat Hassan Reis's death come from *Histoire de Barbarie et de ses corsaires, des royaumes, et des villes d'Alger, de Tunis, de Salé et de Tripoly* (*The History of Barbary and its Corsairs, its Kingdoms, and the Cities of Algiers, Tunis, Salé, and Tripoli*), Second edition, (published in 1649), pp. 444-446.

Father Dan says in *Histoire de Barbarie* that he heard the story of Don Pedro and Don Juan while in Algiers.

Father Dan spent the latter part of his career at the headquarters of the Trinitarian Order in Paris. There, he heard numerous stories of captivity and escape directly from the captives themselves as they returned and passed though the Order's headquarters. It was here that he heard the story of the three Capuchin friars and the capture of Calafat Hassan Reis.

He also recorded one other thing in *Histoire de Barbarie*: that he had heard that Don Juan was filled with painful remorse for having abandoned the religion of his birth.

Maybe. Maybe not. It is what Father Dan would have wanted to hear, after all.

Don Juan was, perhaps, a practical man who valued being alive more than being religiously faithful. There were more than a few men like that.

Such were the times in which they lived.

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VEENBOER, AKA SULIEMAN REIS – PART 1

APRIL 7, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

At the height of his success as an Algiers-based corsair, the Dutch renegade corsair Captain Simon Dancer commanded a sizeable fleet of ships. (See the two-part *Renegade Corsair Captains: the Tale of Simon Dancer* post in the *Corsairs* section of this blog, March 2019, for details of Simon Dancer's career.) One of the officers in Dancer's fleet was another Dutchman, a man named Ivan de Veenboer ("Veenboer" means "peat farmer").

De Veenboer began his career as a licensed privateer employed by the Republic of the Netherlands, but he exceeded the bounds in his commission—in his case by plundering ships from countries allied with the Republic—and so became an outlaw pirate. Like others, he ended up in Algiers. There, he became connected with Dancer and served with him for some time.

In 1609, Dancer managed to arrange a pardon for himself from the French King Henry IV. Once he got word that the pardon had been officially granted, Dancer abandoned Algiers for Marseille, taking with him three ships besides his own, and a collection of repentant European renegades, slaves he had liberated, and captive Muslims.

De Veenboer did not go with him. Instead, having converted to Islam, he became a corsair captain in his

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Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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own right—known by his Muslim name, Sulieman Reis ("Reis" meaning "Captain").

Like Dancer, de Veenboer was a complicated man.

On the one hand, he was clearly a capable and ruthlessly efficient corsair captain, for he captured many European ships and brought in huge amounts of booty, enough so that he, like Dancer, lived in a sumptuous mansion in Algiers, where he entertained lavishly and, no doubt, began to collect a respectable harem—as was the habit of wealthy men in Algiers at the time. Moreover, in 1617, after close to decade of successful corsairing, he became head of the Taifa, the ruling council of Algiers corsair captains.

In Algiers, successful corsair captains were not only wealthy and important men; they were folk heroes. They walked—swaggered, rather—though the streets as lords of all they surveyed. After all, it was they who provided the constant influx of wealth that kept the city alive. The Taifa, made up of such men, was a powerful and influential organization, and its leader was one of the most prominent men in Algiers. It is not surprising that de Veenboer, a renegade, should become head of the Taifa; over half the corsair captains in Algiers at this time were renegades, and close to half of them were Dutchmen.

To officially mark de Veenboer's rise to his position, the Ottoman Sultan himself sent de Veenboer a costly silk caftan—a sign of exceptional respect.

Throughout all this, however, de Veenboer retained positive—perhaps nostalgic—feelings towards his home country. There are, for instance, stories of him capturing Dutch ships but putting the Dutch sailors safely ashore. He apparently liked to surround

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himself with his fellow countrymen, and many of his crew were Dutch renegades. On one occasion, he intervened directly in the sale of two Dutch captives (a ship Captain and his young brother) and, "dressed as if he were the pasha of Algiers himself" (perhaps in the Sultan's caftan) bought their freedom for 750 Spanish pieces of eight—a great deal of money.

Despite his success in Algiers, though, de Veenboer was apparently ambivalent about, or dissatisfied in some way with, his position there, for he made continued overtures to the States General (the ruling body of the Republic of the Netherlands) and worked to make himself useful to the new Dutch Consul in Algiers, Wynant de Keyser van Bollandt, who had arrived in the summer of 1616 and stayed for a decade.

Exactly what deVeenboer's aim was is unclear. There are some indications that he wanted to supplant de Keyser as the Dutch Consul. There are even hints that he might have wanted to arrange a pardon for himself with the States General and return to the Netherlands—an unlikely eventuality given the fact that he had become a Muslim. Whatever his end goal might have been, though, his attempt to achieve it failed. Initially, the relationship between de Veenboer and de Keyser was friendly, but it soon soured. That and the tensions leading up to, and the outbreak of, war between the Republic of the Netherlands and Algiers in 1618 put an end to whatever hopes de Veenboer might have had.

While he was (fruitlessly) negotiating with the Republic, however, de Veenboer was not idle. In the early summer of 1618, he organized a massive raid on the Islands of Lanzarote, La Gomera, and La Palma, in the Canary Islands. He and another renegade, Tabacca Reis, were the leading Corsair

captains. The Aga (leader) of the janissaries—Algerian corsair ships always carried contingents of janissaries to serve as marines—was a man named Mustaffa. This Canary Island raid was *huge*: 36 ships and 4,000 men, 3,000 of whom were Janissaries. In just over three weeks, the Algerian corsairs captured a total of well over 1,000 people, men women, and children—900 of whom came from Lanzarote.

The Canary island raid was clearly an 'A-list' operation, led by important men: Tabacca Reis was the man de Veenboer replaced as head of the Taifa, and Mustaffa Aga was the man who later replaced de Veenboer. To successfully oversee a raid of this size, de Veenboer must have been an exceptionally skilled and competent leader, as must both Tabacca Reis and Mustaffa Aga. It is no wonder that these men all rose to the rank of head of the Taifa.

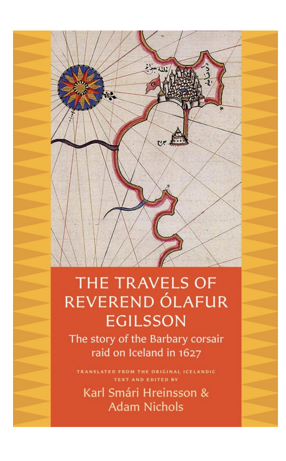
Their ships stuffed with captives and booty, the Algerian corsairs left the Canary Islands and set sail for home. As they passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, however, they ran into trouble. A combined Dutch/Spanish fleet attacked the flotilla of Algerian corsair ships. A truce between the Republic of the Netherlands and Spain was in effect at that time, and the Republic had aligned itself temporarily with the Spanish in its new war against Algiers. In one of the first large-scale actions of the Dutch/Algiers war, all but 17 of the Algiers corsair ships were captured or destroyed. Even with the loss of almost half the fleet, though, this was still a profitable expedition, at least for those who returned, for they unloaded hundreds of captives.

That summer of 1618 was the height of de Veenboer's career. He was famously successful, enormously wealthy, a man of great power and

influence. In Algiers, people pointed to him in awe as he strode the narrow streets of the city.

Having achieved this dizzying success, however, he had nowhere else to go but down.

To find out what happened to him, read *Renegade Corsair Captains: The Tale of Ivan De Veenboer, Aka Sulieman Reis – Part 2* here in this blog.



« RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS: THE TALE OF IVAN DE VEENBOER, AKA SULIEMAN REIS – PART 2.
SHIPBUILDING IN THE SIXTEENTH & SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES – PART 2 »

Corsairs & Captives



RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS: THE TALE OF IVAN DE VEENBOER, AKA SULIEMAN REIS – PART 2.

MARCH 31, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

Not too long after the spectacularly successful raid on the Canary Islands, Mustaffa Reis replaced de Veenboer as head of the Taifa, and de Veenboer decided to give up active corsairing and retire to his villa in Algiers. The idea seems to have been that he would promote some of his lieutenants, set them up as Captains in the own right with their own ships, and send them off corsairing—while he stayed home in his sumptuous villa in Algiers and reaped a large share of the profits.

This arrangement did not last. It is not entirely clear why, though it's easy enough to imagine the sorts of things that could have gone wrong. In any case, by 1620—two years after the Canary Islands raid—de Veenboer was back at sea.

To be successful, a corsair captain needed to be skilled in his trade, ruthless, daring—and lucky.

At this point in his career, de Veenboer began to run out of luck.

The summer season of 1620 started well enough, and he took a couple of prizes. But in July, the small fleet of four ships he commanded was caught by a trio of Dutch warships. One ship was lost, and de Veenboer's and the other two ships only just managed to escape and limp back to Algiers. It took a month of repairs before de Veenboer's ship was properly seaworthy again. He was apparently undaunted by this setback, however, and, by September, he set out once more, this time with a fleet of eight ships.

They cruised for several weeks, taking nothing but small prizes. Then, near Cartagena, they encountered a mixed fleet of seven ships—Dutch Portuguese, and French—returning from Newfoundland with a load



Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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of dried salt cod. Early on the morning of October 10, the two fleets engaged in battle (see the illustration above for a depiction of that battle). It should not have been a long conflict. De Veenboer's ships outnumbered the incoming fleet eight to seven. More importantly, the corsair ships were larger, better armed, and with bigger crews. The Newfoundland fleet fought doggedly, though, and the struggle went on well into the afternoon, with casualties on both sides.

By then, it was doubtful which side might prevail.

De Veenboer's lost luck decided the day.

We don't have any sources from North Africa about this sea fight between the Newfoundland ships and de Veenboer's fleet, but we do have an account written by a Dutchman aboard one of the Newfoundland ships—David Pieterszoon de Vries, a globe-trotting seaman who wrote a narrative of his varied experiences: *Korte Historiael ende Journaels Aenteyckeninge van verscheyden voyagiens in* & *vier deelen des Werelts-ronde, als Europa, Africa, Asia, ende Amerika gedaen* (*Short Historical and Journal Notes of Several Voyages Made in the Four Parts of the World, namely, Europe, Africa, Asia, and America*).

Here is his description of the battle (slightly abridged):

On the 10th of October, in the morning at sunrise, we saw eight ships along the coast, who approached us where we drifted along with no wind. I ordered the steersman to recite the Lord's prayer, and we sang Psalm 140. Having done that, I gave my men wine, and said everyone should know himself and

that now was the time to show they were men, and that I on my part would lead them as a soldier and good captain. There were two who had sailed to war before, and they started to complain loudly. They had been always brawlers and quarrelers against their crewmates and were so ready to pull knives against them that it seem they could cut off seven arms from three men. But now they behaved like cowardly good-for-nothings. I called out to them, took up a sword, and smacked the rogues in the ribs with the flat of the blade.

When the Turks came upon us, they cut off our Admiral [the lead ship of the Newfoundland flotilla] and surrounded him with three of their ships, their Admiral's and two others. When I, as Vice Admiral, raised the Flag of the Dutch Prince, their Vice Admiral sailed towards me in a ship that had 28 canons and 250 Turks aboard. After him came a large ship with 33 canons and 300 men.

One Turkish ship was windward behind us, and the other leeward, and we gave them as much as we could. In the afternoon, around 4 o'clock, our Admiral caught fire, and only seven men came off it. Our little ship, which was in front of our bow, fired a shot at the stern of the Admiral of Algiers, which killed one man and took off the leg of the Admiral. This Admiral was a Dutch renegade, as we learned later, and was called de Veenboer. After that, the Turks turned away from us, as they understood from some Frenchmen they had captured that we had no cargo aboard our ships but fish. They said that if they had known that, they would have left us alone because they had lost that day more than 200 men.

This encounter and battle happened off the Spanish coast near Barcelona. *

And that was the end of Ivan de Veenboer/Sulieman Reis.

The corsair fleet returned to Algiers, bringing back one of the Newfoundland ships as booty—and de Veenboer's corpse.

One minute, de Veenboer was a justly dreaded corsair Captain in command of a fleet of ships; the next, he was so much inert meat. Being smart, ruthless, and successful was not, in the end, enough to preserve him.

Such was the life of a Barbary corsair.

* This description of the final battle of de Veenboer is taken from de Vries, *Korte Historiael* (originally published in 1665), pp 28-31.

« PRIVATEERING — THE BUSINESS OF PIRACY: PART 1
RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS : THE TALE OF IVAN DE VEENBOER, AKA SULIEMAN REIS – PART 1 »

Corsairs & Captives

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RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS: THE TALE OF SIMON DANCER – PART 1

MARCH 11, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

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Barbary corsairs were Muslims operating out of North African ports, but they were not all North Africans. Quite a number of them were *renegados* (from the Spanish for "renegade"). That is, quite a number of them were European Christians who had renounced their own religion and converted to Islam—'turned Turk' as the expression was.

North African Muslims welcomed European converts to their religion. More importantly, after such new converts had adopted Islam, they became fully accepted members of the Muslim community. In Europe, renegados were universally detested as traitors to the true faith. Nonetheless, many Europeans did convert and made new and successful lives for themselves, plying their trades, marrying, and raising families, often becoming important and respected—and completely accepted—members of their communities in the process.

Some of these European *renegados* no doubt became Muslims because they underwent a true transformation of faith, but others seem to have switched religions for more pragmatic reasons: slaves who converted could find a pathway to freedom, or at least to less onerous conditions; captives who converted quickly enough could sometimes avoid slavery entirely. One sub-group of Europeans seemed especially prone to pragmatic conversion: pirates. In the uncertain times of the early seventeenth century, numerous European pirates settled in North African ports, where many of them became *renegados* and were welcomed.

In fact, European pirate captains did not necessarily even have to become *renegados*. Just the mere possibility that one day they might convert was sometimes enough for them to be welcomed—as long as they were bringing in sufficient loot.



Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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One of the most famous of these non-*renegado* pirate-turned-corsair captains was Simon Dancer.

Simon Dancer was a Dutchman, likely born in Dordrecht, in the Netherlands, around 1570. By his thirties, he had become a privateer Captain. Such privateers received official letters of marque from the States General, the ruling body of the Republic of the Netherlands, authorizing them to harass Spanish shipping (the Republic of the Netherlands fought its own war for independence, against the Spanish, two centuries before the Americans fought theirs against the English). Each privateer expedition was financed by private backers who invested in the expedition in hopes of making a profit on the sale of any booty the privateer ship managed to acquire. So privateers were employed by the States General for a political end—helping to winning the war of independence against Spain—but they were also a species of entrepreneurial businessmen out to make their (and their backers') fortune.

Simon Dancer was a particularly successful privateer Captain. He picked up the name "Dancer," so the story goes, because he reliably returned to his home port at the end of each expedition (loaded with booty), and that sort of cruise—out and back again to the same port—was commonly referred to as a round dance.

That 'round dance' reliability did not last, though. In the middle of what appears to have been a successful career as a privateer captain, Simon Dancer abruptly changed course.

Sometime around 1605-06, he wound up in Marseille. Exactly what he was doing there is not clear. He might have had a letter of marque authorizing him to hunt in the Mediterranean, but he might simply have

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taken off on his own, for if the stories about his actions in Marseille are true, he certainly did not behave like an honest privateer. In fact, it looks like he might have intended to abandon privateering entirely.

Perhaps it was for love. One version of his story has him marrying the daughter of the "Governor" of Marseille. Things did not go well, though. He quarrelled bitterly with the city authorities (and thus also with his new father-in-law) and accumulated ruinous gambling debts, as a result of which he lost his ship (perhaps the debt and the quarrel with the authorities were connected). Whatever the case, the new life he had tried to make for himself in Marseille disintegrated quite spectacularly.

In desperation, he stole a fishing boat from out of the Marseille harbor and fled the city.

Dancer must have been a charismatic character, for he was able to entice a crew—perhaps members of his privateering crew—to help him steal the fishing boat and follow him out of Marseille into the unknown.

Using that stolen Marseille boat, Dancer and his men captured a large merchant ship (some sources say it was English). They then sailed both vessels to Algiers, where, as Dutchmen and thus fellow enemies of Spain (the Algerians were perennially at war with Spain), they were allowed to land and sell their booty.

Dancer then proceeded to launch an astonishingly successful career as a corsair operating out of Algiers —without converting to Islam. At some point, he fell in with Captain John Ward, an English *renegado* Captain based in Tunis, and for several years, the two

of them ravaged the Mediterranean with a fleet of ships. Dancer became known as the *Dali Rais*, the Devil Captain, partly because of his fearless daring and ruthlessness, but also because he refused to convert to Islam and so, from the Muslim perspective, was indeed a kind of devil incarnate.

Dancer liked to sail in large ships, one of which was described as being equipped with 55 cannons and a crew of 400. His crews were composed of both Europeans (mainly Dutchmen) and North African Muslims. During the time he operated out of Algiers, he captured an average of something like fifteen European ships a year and sank an untold number of others, a success rate that enabled him to amass a huge fortune and live in an opulent mansion in Algiers when he was ashore.

Dancer and Ward not only enjoyed successful careers as corsair Captains, they also had an important influence on their hosts: they are credited with being the men who began the process of teaching the Barbary corsairs how to build and sail European-style, square-rigged sailing ships—Ward in Tunis and Dancer in Algiers.

Dancer's corsair career was spectacularly successful, but it only lasted three years. By that time, he seems to have had enough (or had amassed enough wealth). He had also begun to develop enemies in Algiers, and his continual refusal to convert was becoming a provocation. Perhaps all along he had planned to spend only a few years as a corsair.

Whatever the reason, he began negotiations with several European powers for a pardon.

When all else failed, European monarchs and governments dealt with well-known pirate Captains

by granting them an official pardon for their piratical deeds and providing them with a new place of residence. It might not have been actual justice, but providing pirates with legal forgiveness and a haven where they could settle down unmolested with their loot (and so retire from piracy) effectively took them out of commission and so made the seas a little safer.

Dancer managed to arrange a pardon from the French King Henry IV.

At first, this was a great success all around. King Henry rid the seas of a notorious pirate (and incidentally received a handsome gratuity from a grateful Dancer as well), and Dancer settled down peacefully in Marseille.

And lived happily ever after.

Well… not quite.

To find out what happened to Simon Dance in his retirement, read *Renegade Corsair Captains: the Tale of Simon Dancer – Part 2.*

« RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS: THE TALE OF SIMON DANCER – PART 2

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RENEGADE CORSAIR CAPTAINS: THE TALE

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OF SIMON DANCER – PART 2

MARCH 3, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *Renegade Corsair Captains: the Tale of Simon Dancer – Part 1*. If you haven't done so already, it's best to read that post before continuing on here.)

Simon Dancer planned his new life as a retired ex-pirate carefully.

First, he managed to arrange for a pardon from the French King, Henry IV.

Having secretly negotiating this pardon, Dancer—who was still in Algiers—bought three ships that had been brought into the harbor there as corsair prizes. Dancer acted as if he were merely purchasing them as an investment. At a given signal, however, the Muslim crews of these ships were killed outright, tossed overboard, or taken captive. Dancer's new fleet of four ships then sailed out of the Algiers harbor, taking with them to freedom a large number of European slaves, the merchandise the ships contained, and two cannons Dancer had 'borrowed' from the Pasha of Algiers. Some versions of the story claim that, on his way to Marseilles to take up his pardon, Dancer captured one of the great Spanish galleons and came away with treasure worth half a million pieces of eight.

His arrival at Marseille created quite a stir, since he came sailing grandly in at the head of a flotilla of four ships heavily laden with a huge mass of booty, a



Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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crowd of liberated slaves, and gangs of Muslim captives.

As an ex-pirate, Dancer was—not surprisingly—a notorious figure, respected and admired by some, loathed by others. He made the pilgrimage to Paris and met there with King Henry IV, giving his majesty a generous gift of treasure (to ensure the permanency of his pardon). He spread his money around in Marseilles, too, trying to buy allies. He still had to employ bodyguards all the time he was there, though.

The stories about him are not clear, but presumably he chose Marseilles as his new home so that he could return to his French wife. Whatever the case, he spent five years there in relative peace.

It did not last.

Dancer had too valuable a skill set to let him retire, and the French authorities decided to employ him in their dealings with the Ottoman Regencies. First he played a role in an expedition to Algiers. Some years later, he was sent to Tunis as part of a mission to negotiate the ransom of French captives there.

At first, things in Tunis went well. The Dey of Tunis himself came out to the ship Dancer was using—an extraordinary gesture of courtesy—and the two men spent a pleasant afternoon together, so pleasant that the Dey invited Dancer to his palace the next day. Dancer accepted. The following morning, he came ashore accompanied by twelve men—his usual contingent of bodyguards—and marched to the Dey's palace. As he approached the entrance gate, an honor guard of janissary soldiers opened the doors for him and ushered him through.

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And then slammed the doors shut before the bodyguards could follow.

It turned out that Dancer's absconding from Algiers and taking the French King's pardon had made him enemies—implacable enemies—not only in Algiers itself but across North Africa. He was brought before the Dey of Tunis in chains and beheaded on the spot.

And that was the end—sudden and messy—of Simon Dancer.

Ironically enough, it was the two cannons he had taken out of Algiers that formed Dancer's most lasting legacy in the Muslim world. Year after year, the Algerian authorities irately demanded their return. Finally, as one of the prerequisites to signing a treaty with the French, the Algerians succeeded in repatriating their guns.

For years, the Algiers authorities proudly displayed the two cannons on the Mole, the breakwater that formed the Algiers harbor, as an example of the might of Algiers and of how the *Dali Rais*, the Devil Captain, had been brought low.

Such was the life of a pirate.

The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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THE DUTCH CONNECTION: HOW SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH PRIVATEERS BECAME

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BARBARY CORSAIRS IN NORTH AFRICA – PART 1

JANUARY 27, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

The idea that Dutch privateers should have ended up among the Barbary corsairs of North Africa may at first seem unlikely, but it turns out to be one of those historical associations which, seen in retrospect, seems almost inevitable.

The early seventeenth century was a time of violent upheaval throughout Europe. The discovery of the New World—and the riches that could be extracted from it—led to bitter conflicts. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation led to even more bitter conflicts. In the fifty years spanning the last quarter of the sixteenth and the first quarter of the seventeenth centuries, there were no less than seventeen major wars fought on European soil, plus numerous violent rebellions within individual European nations. And while these various clashes were playing out, there was also an ongoing, fierce struggle between the European powers and the Ottoman Empire.

One of the longest of the European conflicts was the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), the Republic of the Netherlands' battle for independence from the Spanish Hapsburg Empire.

The Dutch/North African connection has its roots in that conflict.

- THE OTHER ARMADA – PART 1 December 19, 2022
- ALGIERS – AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1627 – PART 2 December 12, 2022



Seventeenth century Barbary corsair

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The Dutch, especially at the beginning of the war, suffered from a perennial lack of needed resources. They were short on weapons, short on soldiers, short on ships. A number of immediate causes accounted for this: the despoiling of the Dutch provinces by the Spanish authorities overseeing them, losses in battle once the rebellion against the Spanish Hapsburgs was launched, the relative smallness and concomitant lack of resources of the rebellious provinces themselves.

There was also a more fundamental underlying problem, though.

Seventeenth century European countries were not the sort of nation states they are now. One of the main ways they differed was that they lacked the massive, stable tax base that modern nation states rely on. Among other things, this lack of a tax base meant that seventeenth century countries had difficulty maintaining permanent military forces. This was a challenge even for a large country like Spain, with vast quantities of silver and gold arriving annually from the New World. It was an especially painful problem for the nascent Republic of the Netherlands.

The Eighty years' War, like so many wars, was fought both on land and at sea. Fielding an army required a huge initial outlay and was obscenely expensive, so a military loss also meant a financial loss, in some cases a catastrophic financial loss. There was simply no way around that. There was, however, a way to finesse the financing of naval forces. Though it was necessary to bankroll and equip a standing navy—there was no way around that, either—the standing navy could be augmented by an irregular supporting force of privateers.

Privateers were private individuals—that is, not regular naval personnel—equipped with legal authorization from their government to attack enemy ships and steal merchandise from them, and frequently to steal the ships themselves.

The Republic of the Netherlands (and other countries as well) made extensive use of privateers, for they presented a nearly perfect solution to the problem of financing naval operations. The government provided legal cover for the privateer in the form of an official license, usually referred to as a letter of marque. A privateer in possession of such a license was given legal sanction to attack 'enemy' shipping—the definition of 'enemy' being given in the letter of marque. As long as the privateer kept within the bounds of his letter of marque, everything he did was completely legal.

In other words, a privateer was a lawfully authorized pirate.

The beauty of this system from the government's perspective was that the costs of equipping a privateering expedition were born entirely by the privateers themselves and by the financial backers of individual privateer ships. The profits, however, were shared with the government. So the use of privateers allowed the Republic of the Netherlands to increase the number of armed ships available for the conflict against Spain without having to incur the expenses necessary to permanently enlarge their navy—while at the same time bringing in much needed extra revenue.

A perfect solution.

Almost.

There was a recurring problem with privateers.

They may have been licensed pirates, but they were still pirates, making their living by plundering others. The temptation to cross the line between officially licensed, regulated privateer and lawless pirate was always there. After all, why go through the huge risk involved in attacking other ships, only to have to give away a large part of the spoils to financial backers and government officials who sat back at home and did nothing more strenuous than cozy up to a warm hearth and toast their good fortune with goblets of fine imported wine?

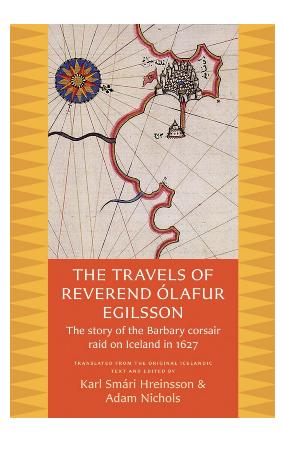
Also, effective privateers were aggressive risk takers, and in the heat of action they could all too easily transcend the strict limits of their commissions and find themselves outside the law, even if they had not originally intended to be. Beyond all that, privateering, like piracy of any sort, was a violent business that corroded the men who practice it, so that violence became virtually all they knew. These sorts of men were difficult to constrain with mere pieces of paper.

So right from the earliest days of the famous Sea Beggars onward, controlling the swarms of privateers the States General employed was a challenge, and there were always rogues who ended up operating outside of any restraint.

A formal system was worked out, though, that kept such rogues in check—or at least kept them in check enough—so that for two generations the government-sponsored Dutch privateers functioned effectively as a (loosely) organized fighting force that was not only militarily successfully against the Spanish but also profitable.

And then… everything changed.

To find out what that change was, go to *The Dutch Connection: How Seventeenth Century Dutch Privateers Became Barbary Corsairs in North Africa – Part 2.*



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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« THE DUTCH CONNECTION: HOW SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DUTCH PRIVATEERS BECAME BARBARY CORSAIRS IN NORTH AFRICA – PART 2

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CENTURY DUTCH PRIVATEERS BECAME BARBARY CORSAIRS IN NORTH AFRICA – PART 2

JANUARY 20, 2019 • ADAM NICHOLS • CORSAIRS

(This post is a continuation of *The Dutch Connection: How Seventeenth Century Dutch Privateers Became Barbary Corsairs in North Africa – Part 1*. If you haven't done so already, it's best to read that post before continuing on here.)

The carefully regulated Dutch privateer enterprise went on for the better part of forty years, generating consistent profits and training several generations of seafarers in the rough business of attacking and looting ships.

And then everything changed.

In 1609, the Republic of the Netherlands and Spain signed a truce—the Twelve Years' Truce—and hostilities between the two countries ceased. As a result, Dutch privateers were no longer needed.

The whole enterprise collapsed (at least temporarily; it resumed again after the truce ended in 1621).

Dutch privateers at this time, remember, were inheritors of a long tradition; all their lives, the Republic of the Netherlands had been at war. They



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fought in that war; their fathers fought in it; in some cases, their grandfathers had fought in it. War defined life, one way or another, for their whole generation.

When the truce came into effect, most privateers bowed to the inevitable and returned to their home ports and took up life as merchant seamen (though likely with misgivings, for their future was uncertain, and also no doubt with a certain amount of regret, for they stood a far better chance of earning real money as privateers than they ever did as ordinary sailors). A significant number of privateers, however, did not give up their trade. Perhaps they were reluctant to accept the relative poverty and poor conditions that life as merchant seamen offered. Or perhaps they had been at the game too long and simply could not imagine any other way of making a living. Whatever the reason, they were unwilling, or unable, to return to ordinary life. Instead, they stayed out at sea and became outlaw pirates, indiscriminately attacking whatever ships they came across.

These new pirates had a problem, though.

It is an easy thing to overlook, but without suitable ports, pirates simply could not survive. In order to make their enterprise profitable, they needed to be able to sell their booty, and they had to regularly revictual and refit their ships and repair any damage they sustained at sea. So they needed ports where they could have easy access to merchants who were not only able and willing to buy stolen goods but who also had extensive enough trade networks to export those stolen goods and to import the range of supplies required to repair and outfit pirate ships and crews.

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The outlaw status of the new Dutch pirates prevented them from using ordinary European ports, so they had to search for new ones. For a time, they used Irish ports. Ireland in those days was a sort of maritime 'wild west.' English control was tenuous, small harbors and ports were plentiful, and the local people and their English overlords saw the profit in dealing with pirates, both in victualling their ships and entertaining their crews (who had ready cash to spend) and in buying the stolen goods they offered at cut-rate prices. The new Dutch pirates also made use of La Rochelle, on the Atlantic coast of France, a Huguenot port allied with the Republic of the Netherlands that Dutch privateers had been frequenting since the time of the Sea Beggars.

The multiple small ports and cooperative population that Ireland offered were convenient enough, but they contained limited facilities, and the Dutch pirates needed better markets for their booty and better sources of supply than those the little backwater Irish harbors could provide. Plus, English naval forces began to harass those Irish ports. La Rochelle, too, had its problems (it would eventually be besieged and captured by Catholic French forces). So the Dutch pirates went in search of new ports out of which they could operate.

They found those ports along the North African shore.

In fact, it was a natural choice. For the forty years or so of conflict that preceded the Twelve Years' Truce, the Republic of the Netherlands and the North African Ottoman Regencies—Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers—and Salé (which became an independent republic) had shared a common enemy: Spain. And though ships from the Republic and the Regencies and Salé regularly attacked each other, the

relationship was not a purely antagonistic one. On the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my ally," privateers/pirates from the Republic and Barbary corsairs had sometimes operated, if not as outright allies, at least as fellow combatants against the common foe. Moreover, Dutch privateers who had gone rogue and become outlaws had been making use of North African ports all along.

Dutch ex-privateers were welcomed by the North Africans, especially if the newcomers converted to Islam—for North African Muslims eagerly welcomed European converts to their religion. Not only did the North Africans welcome them; once the new converts adopted Islam, they became fully accepted members of the Muslim community. In Europe, these converts were known as renegades and were universally detested as traitors to the true faith. Nonetheless, many Europeans did convert and made new and successful lives for themselves, plying their trades, marrying, and raising families, often becoming important and respected—and completely accepted—members of their communities in the process.

Since the Dutch ex-privateers had, so to speak, burned their bridges behind them, many (most) converted, were absorbed into the fabric of North African Muslim society, and began new lives as Barbary corsairs.

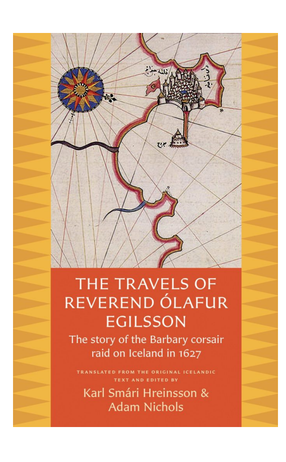
Despite their dark reputation, Barbary corsairs were not simply pirates. Like the Dutch, they too were privateers. Each Barbary corsair Captain carried the equivalent of a letter of marque from the official authorities of his home port authorizing him to attack and loot 'enemy' shipping and to bring back booty to be auctioned off. As with the Dutch, corsair expeditions were financed by consortiums, booty

had to be adjudicated and declared legal before it could be sold, and profits were shared out on a *pro rata* basis to financial backers, the state, and the captain and crew.

This system was entirely familiar to the Dutch ex-privateers, and they fit right in—plying their old trade but with a new sponsor.

And so, with hardly a ripple, a generation of Dutch privateers morphed into Barbary corsairs.

The early seventeenth century was a more primitive age than our own in some ways, much rougher, with a less sophisticated level of technology. But it was no less complex in terms of the social, political, and religious lives of the inhabitants. The conflict between European states and North African Barbary corsairs during this period was not the simple clash of violently antithetical civilizations—Christian versus Islamic—that most people imagine. Instead, the borders between the two sides were porous, as the example of the Dutch privateers shows. History is fractal: no matter what level of detail you look at, things are complicated.



The Travels of Reverend Ólafur Egilsson

The story of the Barbary corsair raid on Iceland in 1627

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